

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Shaun Woodward): On 18 November, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced their respective parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein, had reached an historic agreement on the process which would facilitate the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The parties also agreed the Northern Ireland Executive, which has not met since June, will begin meeting again on Thursday 20 November and will continue on a weekly basis until business is up to date; whereupon the Executive will revert to fortnightly meetings.

This breakthrough represents a new chapter for Northern Ireland, marking the beginning of an agreed process that will end in the transfer of policing and justice powers from this House to locally elected politicians in the power-sharing Assembly at Stormont.

It sets out the initial structure of a new Department of Justice and the arrangements for the election of a new Justice Minister.

It also provides for responsibility for the appointment and removal of judicial office holders to rest with the Judicial Appointments Commission.

All of these arrangements will be time-limited and the parties have agreed that they will come to an end before May 2012, at which point permanent arrangements will need to be made.

As well as agreeing the steps to transfer these crucial powers, the events of this week mark the maturing of democracy in Northern Ireland. Negotiations that led to the Belfast and at St Andrews Agreements were driven by the British and Irish Governments. Yesterday's agreement was the product of negotiations between the

political parties of Northern Ireland; its essential strength will rest in being an agreement made by Belfast and in Belfast for all the people of Northern Ireland.

The British Government remains ready to help the parties continue moving the process forward and will now finish preparations for legislation and the Orders for the transfer of powers when the Assembly expresses its wish to effect the transition.